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The Plight of Young Black Men — Another Look

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Harvard sociology professor Orlando Patterson, author of *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries*, offers another interesting analysis of why young black men are falling so far behind other American demographic groups in terms of economic and social advancement.

Writing in Sunday's edition of *The New York Times*, Patterson argues that the effects of culture outweigh economic factors. This is a truly important argument. This is how he sets the problem:

Why are young black men doing so poorly in school that they lack basic literacy and math skills? These scholars must know that countless studies by educational experts, going all the way back to the landmark report by James Coleman of Johns Hopkins University in 1966, have found that poor schools, per se, do not explain why after 10 years of education a young man remains illiterate.

Nor have studies explained why, if someone cannot get a job, he turns to crime and drug abuse. One does not imply the other. Joblessness is rampant in Latin America and India, but the mass of the populations does not turn to crime. And why do so many young unemployed black men have children — several of them — which they have no resources or intention to support? And why, finally, do they murder each other at nine times the rate of white youths?

What's most interesting about the recent spate of studies is that analysts seem at last to be recognizing what has long been obvious to anyone who takes culture seriously: socioeconomic factors are of limited explanatory power. Thus it's doubly depressing that the conclusions they draw and the prescriptions they recommend remain mired in traditional socioeconomic thinking.

Further, Patterson offers his view of why economic opportunity has not led to advancement among young black males:

What has happened, I think, is that the economic boom years of the 90's and one of the most successful policy initiatives in memory — welfare reform — have made it impossible to ignore the effects of culture. The Clinton administration achieved exactly what policy analysts had long said would pull black men out of their torpor: the economy grew at a rapid pace, providing millions of new jobs at all levels. Yet the jobless black youths simply did not turn up to take them. Instead, the opportunity was seized in large part by immigrants — including many blacks — mainly from Latin America and the Caribbean.

Professor Patterson acknowledges that many persons would reject his argument out of hand. It is not politically correct to frame the issue as he does. But, as he responds to these criticisms:

First is the pervasive idea that cultural explanations inherently blame the victim; that they focus on internal behavioral factors and, as such, hold people responsible for their poverty, rather than putting the onus on their deprived environment. (It hasn't helped that many conservatives do actually put forth this view.)

But this argument is utterly bogus. To hold someone responsible for his behavior is not to exclude any recognition of the environmental factors that may have induced the problematic behavior in the first place. Many victims of child abuse end up behaving in self-destructive ways; to point out the link between their behavior and the destructive acts is in no way

to deny the causal role of their earlier victimization and the need to address it.

Likewise, a cultural explanation of black male self-destructiveness addresses not simply the immediate connection between their attitudes and behavior and the undesired outcomes, but explores the origins and changing nature of these attitudes, perhaps over generations, in their brutalized past. It is impossible to understand the predatory sexuality and irresponsible fathering behavior of young black men without going back deep into their collective past.

Second, it is often assumed that cultural explanations are wholly deterministic, leaving no room for human agency. This, too, is nonsense. Modern students of culture have long shown that while it partly determines behavior, it also enables people to change behavior. People use their culture as a frame for understanding their world, and as a resource to do much of what they want. The same cultural patterns can frame different kinds of behavior; and by failing to explore culture at any depth, analysts miss a great opportunity to re-frame attitudes in a way that encourages desirable behavior and outcomes.

Third, it is often assumed that cultural patterns cannot change — the old “cake of custom” saw. This too is nonsense. Indeed, cultural patterns are often easier to change than the economic factors favored by policy analysts, and American history offers numerous examples.

As evidence of cultural influences that have not served young black men well, he points to the hip-hop culture, the “cool-pose culture,” and other examples of what he calls the “Dionysian trap for young black men.”

Here is his sobering conclusion — directed at both conservatives and liberals in terms of political conviction:

The tragedy unfolding in our inner cities is a time-slice of a deep historical process that runs far back through the cataracts and deluge of our racist past. Most black Americans have by now, miraculously, escaped its consequences. The disconnected fifth languishing in the ghettos is the remains. Too much is at stake for us to fail to understand the plight of these young men. For them, and for the rest of us.

